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THE MYSTICISM OF A MODERNIST

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The current conception divides religious from scientific belief, so that it seems almost as if religious belief supplied our emotional needs and scientific belief did not. Put into crude terms, this is the sense in which all maintainers of old creeds, who are not merely obscurantist, oppose the dismemberment of tradition. They even say that it is not the mere sentiment which attaches to an inheritance from the past that makes an old creed seem necessary to an intelligent man. For this intelligent man must have in his life a glamor such as science can never give, and the glamor comes from the religious creed. On this ground the mysticism which has always accompanied and exalted intellectual views of the universe must be sought from our traditional creeds, for it can never arise from science and history.

It is our purpose here to maintain the opposite. We shall endeavor to show how a mysticism may arise from the acceptance of science and history as the only possible intellectual views of the universe. So that what has been the chief argument for the maintenance of inherited creeds will be seen to be false. It does not in fact follow that the highest religious life can *only* arise from the acceptance of traditional creeds, simply because in the past there has been this connection. We are willing to admit that in the thirteenth century mysticism and deep religious feeling depended upon a belief in the eucharist as the physical body of Christ; but it by no means follows that the intellectual disagreement with such a belief implies a desertion of mysticism. This may seem very obvious; but we mean more. We mean that the highest mysticism does not depend even on the belief in a personal God, for the emotional needs of man are just as completely supplied by science and history as they ever were by any theology.

This is not, however, an argument against any form of theology. It is to be understood that if the evidence seems to show the

existence of a personal God, we must believe in his existence. But if the evidence shows nothing of the kind, we cannot excuse the continuance of our belief in a personal God on the ground that such a belief satisfies our emotional needs. We cannot, if we think that the evidence does not prove the resurrection of Christ, continue to teach children to believe it on the ground that it may give them comfort; because as much comfort may come from scientific formula or the statements of history.

Our argument depends on a conception that the continuity of religion is a continuity of form and not of content. What is called religion by the most orthodox today is no more like the "religio" of the old Romans than the religion of the fortieth century will be like the orthodoxy of today. We use the word religion therefore to indicate a life of enthusiasm for the ideal, implying some sort of belief in the value of that ideal, at least to the minds of men. Whether the ideal is conceived as a force outside us or within us is merely a matter of metaphor. "Inside" and "outside" have no meaning with reference to what is not spatial.

It will follow from this conception of religion and of religious knowledge that mysticism cannot refer solely to a form of theological sentiment; for an emotion flows from modern science, history, and philosophy, which is at least as transforming as any that ever came from theology. The new belief is not less valuable for the emotional needs of men. I shall not attempt to explain why it is possible to conceive religion and religious knowledge in such a way as I have expressed. There is indeed a law of development in this as in other kinds of experience; but for the sake of the present argument I shall assume that the enthusiasm connected with social reform and ideals of individual life is what in our day takes the place of the old devotion to the will of God and the attempt to reach heaven. I have called this enthusiasm "religion," and have therefore implied a connection between the attitude expressed in such a document as the Apostles' Creed and the attitude of the modern scientist, historian, or reformer. But I do not wish to make it a matter of words, and if "religion" cannot be so used, some other term may be found. The essential truth remains: we have today an enthusiasm for civilized intellect-

ual life in the individual and a better arrangement of society, and we have also a view of the universe very different from that of the authors of the creeds or the Bible. One cannot separate the elements of any attitude, for the complex should be judged as one whole; and therefore we may compare the modern intellectual attitude as a whole with the intellectual attitude of the thirteenth or the third century. The emotional results of these attitudes differ, and so we may compare the enthusiasm of the thirteenth century with its modern representative, and this modern enthusiasm we call by the old name.

For just as enthusiasm for social reform and individual civilization has taken the place of resignation and the desire for heaven, just as doing one's work well has taken the place of ritual, so also the insight of the philosopher, the scientist, the historian, or the reformer has taken the place of that theological sentiment which used to be called mysticism. Whether we should call this new insight "mystic" or not is another question which I do not intend to discuss; for I mean to use the word in this new sense, just as I use "religion" to express the attitude of the reformer.

The continuity of language is hardly ever a coherence of meaning. The content of a word is sometimes deliberately changed, sometimes vaguely modified; and sometimes, when the experience has changed completely, the old words are used because they are flexible and adaptable, whereas new words are hard and not easily made current. Thus we have now in use such words as "economics," the meaning of which would astonish Xenophon; "tragedy," "sacrifice," and "vote" are all used with meanings which would astonish the thirteenth century. And so I extend the meaning of the word "mysticism."

It now becomes necessary to observe, at least in a summary fashion, the psychological nature of that experience which I have called religion. It differs from the aesthetic or the purely intellectual experience of the artist or of the scientist. It is an enthusiasm for an ideal life depending upon an emotional but at the same time intellectual view of the nature of the world.

In the first place, the moods of every man vary, and with them probably his view of what is most worth doing. No man pursues with a continual enthusiasm any one definite purpose. There

are many ends, most of them good, which are pursued by every individual; for at one time he thinks of the supply of food and clothing which he needs, at another of the companionship he must maintain or increase, at another of music or painting, and at another of the retirement and rest which should follow labor. Among such moods one may be called religious; for the religious man, even in the simplest meaning of the word, does not always feel the enthusiasm which he would call religious; and the attempt to keep any mood artificially prominent produces morbidity. Among all these moods, however, unless there is a mere confusion or an entire absence of thought, there are acknowledged differences of value. Most men will admit that, however it may be in abstract philosophy, the supply of food and clothing is of less importance than the opportunity for hearing music; and one purpose may have to be sacrificed for another, or one may be regarded as means and the other as end. So that there is some sort of connection between these different purposes other than that bare connection which is implied when we say that they are the purposes of the same individual; and it may be possible, within limits, to suppose that one purpose so dominates others that it may become the ruling passion of a life. As with the purposes for which a man works, so with the moods through which he passes, one tends to dominate the others and to form the *temperament* of the man.

Now if absolutism reduces all the variety of life to mere appearance and therefore explains away life itself, the new realism, as far as I understand it, makes of this variety only a monotonous succession of disconnected facts. Against realism we must urge the differences in value in different experiences; and against absolutism, the reality of every experience, however transient, and by reality I mean that such experiences are irreducible and not to be smoothed out into a flux or a system.

It seems that we can go farther than realism generally does in relating our experiences to one another, and we cannot go so far as absolutism generally does. That there are hints, half-meanings, and implications in every sentence seems to be true, and therefore the exactness of realism misrepresents life; but on the other hand we cannot make these hints and implications, as absolut-

ism does, the ground for erasing the distinction between true and false. So that in the end we accept as a description of the modern man an account of various moods, one not destroyed by the other, and of various purposes, one not destroyed by the other. The connection of such moods is organic, and therefore the acceptance of an intellectual statement such as that of evolution changes all the other beliefs of the man. The complex whole which results may be called the modern mind; and it is impossible to suppose that the emotion flowing from modern views is in any sense the *same* as that which came from theological beliefs. Absolutism should not extinguish the variety of intellectual statements in a mere flux of feeling. The emotional view resulting from science is not the same in value as the emotional view coming from mediaeval philosophy. One creed is not as good as another. One mythology is not as good as another.

But what of this modern emotion?

At certain moments there comes an insight which transforms the world and reinterprets the individual life. Whether we say that then new facts come under observation or that then we are momentarily capable of observing more exactly, the result is the same. These moments of insight are used for guidance in the more normal episodes of life. And so in the midst of historical research or of scientific investigation an occasional moment seems to transform the world, just as to the old theologians of the middle ages there seemed to come a sudden divine illumination. For if we read in St. Bonaventura or St. Thomas of the moment at which intellectual labor seems to pass into divine vision and then turn to read in Darwin or in Creighton of the transformation in the scientist or the historian, we seem to perceive a like process ending in a like emotion.

Again, as, in the individual, life varies in value through its different moments, so in the race one individual varies from another. In questions of art one man has insight and another has not. In science one man may learn by rote all the details of fact and yet preserve untouched an antiquated view of the world, while another will see the whole aspect of things in a new light when he has appreciated scientific truth. Again, whether new visions of fact come into existence or certain men are more capable than

others of seeing fact, does not at present concern us: the result is the same. There is a difference of value in the visions of reality among different men. And, once again, this is what we read in the old literature of religious experience of the distinction between the mystic and the unilluminated. So that we are compelled to recognize in modern terms, as successors to the old visionaries, not the worshippers of cabalistic signs and symbolic phrases, but the scientist and the historian. But since in reference to religious experience there is prevalent a very great amount of nonsense, something must now be said as to the claims of visionaries. Mysticism is a dangerous word, because it is sometimes used to hide an entire absence of intelligence. Claims to special insight are made by men ignorant of science, history, or philosophy, and often as deaf to real music and blind to real painting as it is possible to be. Their claims are made on the ground that religious experience is their special province,—that, ignorant as they may be, blind and deaf to every art, yet they have an enthusiasm which may be justly called religious.

Now we have admitted the distinction between religious and other experience. We shall also admit that there may be religious genius, as there may be scientific or artistic genius. Even if "religious" means only moral or only political, still there is a distinct region of fact to which this word refers. But in the first place having religious experience does not entitle a man to respect as an authority on historical or scientific questions. If you have an enthusiasm for an ideal of life, it does not follow that those statements are true which you say are necessary for the maintenance of that enthusiasm. The Christian preacher may be virtuous and he may produce virtue in others, and yet he may be quite wrong both as to the fact that Christ was born of a virgin and as to the fact that virtue even in himself depends on such a belief. To be believed on the former point he should be a trained historian, and on the second point he should be a psychologist. The man who says that his finest enthusiasm "depends upon" a theological creed may be wrong: the enthusiasm even in him may depend upon modern views of the world which he breathes in during his every-day life and of which he is almost unconscious. And, again, religious enthusiasm is of varying degrees; or we may

put it that religion has various stages of development. It may be that the religious enthusiasm is of the primitive kind: that enthusiasm may be directed, let us say, only to the life of the soul. The gospel of resignation may be preached, so that the starving man is told to be content and virtuous and to live a worthy life, even though his body is dying. Religion may be directed to the production of such an attitude. But that would be a very primitive form of religious enthusiasm, because it is childish to suppose that the soul of a man can progress if his body is dying by inches. The fallacies of inadequate thought on this subject are countless, and most of them are due either to the approval of a whole because the part is good or to the calling a less evil good because there is a greater evil.

Now my present point is that a primitive religious enthusiasm may have connected with it a special insight, but that insight cannot be regarded as more valuable than the insight of a more developed mind. It is easier to imagine and perhaps to experience the insight of a simple form of enthusiasm than it is to understand or feel the insight of a greater knowledge. Therefore "real" insight is often confounded with its most primitive form. But it is reasonable to suppose that the mind grows as a whole; and therefore there is every reason to suppose that the finer intelligence may have also the finer religious experience. All forms of intuitionist philosophy either involve the mistake of setting back the clock or are used as excuses for maintaining a primitive experience. Bergson seems to set us back for the obtaining of truth to a mere awareness of the flux of life. At least his interpreters often set aside the insight of the scientist in favor of the bare perception of the common man. Intuition, if contrasted with intellect, is misleading. And in the same way Eucken seems to seek some very restricted way and not the plain road of intelligence in order to reach the vision of the divine. The life of the spirit is divided from that of nature; and again the clock is set back. We are supposed to find the finer religious experience only in unscientific or non-historical minds. The insight of the barbarian is contrasted with the learning by rote of a civilized man: the learning by rote is then called science or history, and the conclusion is evident that such science and history are not so

valuable for the understanding of life. But no one ever supposed that learning by rote was science or history except for the purpose of avoiding labor or excusing ignorance. If the science or history, not of school-boys but of constructive and critical minds, is contrasted with the finest insight of the barbarian, it will be seen how much more of religious enthusiasm there is in the more developed mind. We cannot complain against science and history as barren unless we understand the passion that made them. The appreciation of a feeling of general flux which may arise when all the detail of science and history is blotted out is no better understanding of the nature of life. It may be better than a learning of formulae: it is not better than an appreciation of detailed scientific knowledge.

Now if we suppose that there is no sacred and special way towards knowledge of fact, but that insight is as much to be experienced in abstract science and detailed history as in the vaguer and more primitive philosophy of the creeds and the Bible, then it follows that the insight of a man of science and historian is more valuable than that of the ignorant in proportion as the civilized life is more valuable than the barbaric. Nor is it possible to suppose *a priori* that "religious" insight is higher when scientific knowledge is more primitive; although it may seem that such is the case. The evidence must be reviewed. We must compare the religious insight of the present with that of the past. The evidence shows that one past age excels in painting and another in architecture; but we cannot, unless we are mere *laudatores temporis acti*, say *a priori* that any age of the past excels the present in *any* sphere. And the evidence at present seems to show an enthusiasm arising out of modern knowledge which transforms life as much as the older creeds did.

I am inclined to believe that the facts which appear, or the life which seems good, at exceptional moments in the average man's life is the same as that which appears normally to the exceptional man. When death draws the curtain for the average man, he sees the same fact which is seen more continuously by the philosopher. The resulting emotion may be called mystic, but it is very different in quality from the emotion that follows upon appreciation of an orthodox creed. I do not now compare the

two. I state simply the existence of a transforming emotion derived from an appreciation of the modern view of the world. That is the mysticism of the modernist. That, and not the sentimentalism due to hearing a creed recited or seeing a ritual, is the true mysticism. For the associations of an old creed and ritual certainly produce in the mind an emotion; it is the emotion of memory. Mysticism is the emotion of hope. It looks forward and not back. It builds anew, it does not simply reinstate the old.

This is the point of growth in modern religion. It is here, where the normal touches the exceptional, that the advance is being made which preserves the genuine life of religion. For whereas the modernist has to explain to the orthodox that he values the tradition of the past, he must keep clear in his own mind the appreciation of the future. More Catholic than the pope, he allows not merely for the past but for the revelation which is to come. And what sort of world appears when we use exceptional moments of our own or the continued insight of exceptional men in order to make our philosophy?

To begin with the more practical issue as to the ideal life, it is clear that the individual life is not to be valued with reference only to success and failure. For, not knowing the effects in the far future, we cannot judge of success and failure. And yet we can say that certain efforts are worth making, as for instance Mazzini's, and certain efforts apparently more effective, as for instance Napoleon's, are not so much worth making. It seems to me also that we can say that the issues of good and evil in life are not all to be rendered in the terms of temporal consequences. From all such statements arises an emotional enthusiasm which is the true mysticism.

As to the life of the race in which our own individual life is lived, it seems clear that the idea of progress is mistaken. Progress within a certain limited time there certainly is.

"We build like corals, grave by grave,
That have a pathway sunward."

But the worlds of life which have now disappeared seem to prove that the present system of life will eventually decay. Whether

a better or more "spiritual" will take its place or not, most of what we now hold valuable will disappear. "The old proud pageant of man" will conclude with a jest or a tragedy, and, whether the gods laugh or weep, the play will be over. But our statement of all this results in lifting us high above the mere succession of things.

As to the scene upon which life appears, that too changes its appearance when it is seen at exceptional moments. High up above the blue which bounds our normal sight is the open space of other stars and skies. Deep down within the normal appearance of our daily life are the vast facts of destroying passion and inevitable death, but also of transforming joy and the disdain of death.

If I end now with no clear statement of any transforming vision, it is not because such a vision is impossible or even at present non-existent. My hesitation is due not to the weakness of my own conviction but to my respect for the convictions of others. It seems as though we had come to the summit from which we look out upon a new and unexplored ocean, as those first Spaniards looked out over the Pacific. Most men come to such a point at some moments in life, and exceptional men live more continuously close to the summit. But the world which all see is the same.